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The Pour: Finding Love in Marginal Wines

By Eric Asimov

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More people today have access to more different kinds of wines than ever before in history. I don't say that as a provocateur; it's a fact.

Yes, the commercial incentive to sell a lot of wine causes homogenization as producers on the fringes try to move toward the middle. That's a legitimate concern. Nonetheless, the small yet significant interest in wines that can be described as marginal keeps them afloat even if they get little attention in the mainstream wine press.

Perfect examples would be wines from the Jura – thoroughly distinctive and made nowhere else. Less exotic would be wines from the Loire, from Campania and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, muscadet and spätburgunder – just to name a few – along with unfashionable styles in well-known genres, whether Australian shiraz, California chardonnay or Rioja. Wines like these are available in most urban areas in the United States and many other places with access to a good wine shop or the Internet.

These are all wines that I have loved, and that have excited me. So in between writing about Burgundy and Argentine malbec, wines that attract a lot of attention at both high and low prices, I try to pay attention to wines that may not have as wide an audience as some, but are beloved nonetheless.

That's one reason why my column this week is on manzanilla and fino sherries. These dry sherries, along with amontillado and palo cortado, for that matter, go beautifully with a wide range of foods and are great aperitifs. They are favorites of sommeliers, and wine writers regularly try to promote their pleasures. Still, their popularity will probably not rise much beyond the narrow segment of the market that already appreciates them.

The taste of sherry is too idiosyncratic, too different from most mainstream wines to become wildly popular. I don't mean to come off as a snob, but sherry and most great wines require a commitment to understand them. Like Coltrane or Mahler, Dickens or Dostoevsky, or even baseball, understanding great

wine is not something that you enter lightly. You must make a commitment of time and of thought in a way not required by a simple fruity wine or a popular romance or mystery.

This is not to make a value judgment on how people want to spend their time. It's simply to recognize that certain wines require more of an effort to appreciate than most people are willing to give and therefore are consigned to a form of marginal status.

Of course, a top Bordeaux or Burgundy is always going to be in demand. Wines like these are so universally recognized and applauded that they achieve high status for reasons beyond an appreciation of their intrinsic beauty. But a wine like manzanilla sherry? Its status is so low that few restaurants or wine shops can be troubled even to treat it properly. Bottles sit around in the heat for months, damaging its fragile beauty so that when it's finally opened and tasted it's impossible to understand what all the fuss was about.

While fine small-production examples of manzanilla sherry exist, the mass-produced manzanillas can be exceptional as well, if they are treated properly. As a result, you can taste world-class manzanilla and fino sherries for \$10 to \$20 a bottle, which makes them incredible values. But again, because they are so unusual they require a little bit of a commitment.

If you are interested, here's what I recommend. Find a good Spanish restaurant or tapas bar that is serious about sherries. How can you tell if they're serious? For one thing, sherries will be on the wine list. The drier sherries like manzanillas and finos will be refrigerated and they will be fresh. Try the sherry both as an aperitif and with the foods it was destined to accompany – almonds, olives, boquerones, jamon Iberico, shrimp – any number of traditional tapas. If you like what you're tasting, then you've got a world of pleasures in front of you, from sushi to, well, who knows? A restaurant like Dovetail on the Upper West Side of Manhattan has a special affection for sherry and a terrific chef in John Fraser. The possibilities are endless.